

VZCZCXRO0571  
PP RUEHBC RUEHDE RUEHIHL RUEHKUK  
DE RUEHAK #0560/01 1051504  
ZNY CCCCC ZZH  
P 151504Z APR 09  
FM AMEMBASSY ANKARA  
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 9431  
INFO RUEHZG/NATO EU COLLECTIVE PRIORITY  
RUCNRAQ/IRAQ COLLECTIVE PRIORITY  
RUEHIT/AMCONSUL ISTANBUL PRIORITY 5632  
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC PRIORITY  
RHMFISS/EUCOM POLAD VAIHINGEN GE PRIORITY  
RHEHAAA/NSC WASHDC PRIORITY  
RUEKJCS/JCS WASHDC PRIORITY  
RHMFISS/HQ USEUCOM VAIHINGEN GE PRIORITY  
RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHDC PRIORITY

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ANKARA 000560

SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR EUR/SE

E.O. 12958: DECL: 04/15/2019

TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [MARR](#) [TU](#)

SUBJECT: TURKEY'S TOP GENERAL SPEAKS OUT ON CIVIL-MILITARY  
RELATIONS, PKK AND ROLE OF RELIGION

Classified By: DCM Doug Silliman, Reasons 1.4 (b,d)

1. (C) Summary and comment: Turkish General Staff (TGS) Chief Basbug's April 14 address at the Turkish War Academies Command received blanket and mostly positive media coverage. Commentators called the speech "groundbreaking," "balanced" and "courageous," and characterized the conciliatory language Basbug used in key parts of his speech as an effort to recast the Turkish military's basic philosophy on civil-military relations, the fight against the PKK, the military's relationship with religion, and the importance of secularism for democracy. Some critics questioned the propriety of Turkey's senior military commander delivering a speech that focused almost exclusively on domestic political matters, and viewed the overwhelming media reaction to Basbug's speech as an indication of the military's still disproportionate influence on politics and society. Although many expected him to comment directly on the ongoing Ergenekon probe, Basbug mostly steered clear of current events, promising to address "day-to-day matters" in a news conference the week of April 20. Basbug, who was in turn philosophical and academic in his address, lived up to his reputation as an intellectual and pragmatist. While reiterating familiar TGS positions related to civil-military affairs, the PKK and secularism, Basbug took a conciliatory tone that emphasized the common values shared by all citizens of Turkey. He warned "religious communities" against taking steps to undercut the military but avoided a confrontational tone. At the same time, he challenged the dogmatic views held by many among the secular elite on issues related to identity and religion. End Summary.

CIVILIANS IN CHARGE, BUT SHOULD HEED MILITARY ADVICE  
-----

2. (SBU) At the speech's outset, Basbug unambiguously stated that civilian authorities have the final say on state matters and that the military's role is to provide strategic and tactical advice in military matters. While acknowledging the civilian authorities' primacy, he emphasized the need for mutual respect and cautioned that civilian authorities ignore the advice of the military at their peril, highlighting the US invasion of Iraq as an example. Basbug called Turkey's National Security Council an important mechanism for consultations between civilian and military leaders, stating that all members of the Council have an equal voice and that policy matters are freely debated among members of this forum. Noting NSA Jones' February 8 speech at the Munich Security Conference and interview with the Washington Post,

Basbug said Jones' views concerning the role of the National Security Council was "very useful."

#### FIGHT AGAINST PKK NOT A CLASH OF ETHNICITY

-----

13. (SBU) Basbug stressed that the struggle against the PKK was not one between ethnic groups. In a break from TGS orthodoxy, Basbug acknowledged the existence in Turkey of "secondary identities" based on ethnicity, language and culture, and said that citizens are free to express this secondary identity as long as they remain committed to their overarching "supra-identity" as a "citizen of Turkey" (Note: Commentators welcomed Basbug's use of "citizens of Turkey" as an important shift from the more commonly used term "Turkish citizen", which connotes not only citizenship but ethnicity. End Note).

14. (SBU) While claiming that the military is making significant advances against the PKK, Basbug emphasized that military means alone are insufficient to defeat the PKK. He highlighted the need for the government to use all facets of state power to defeat the PKK and called on the international community to continue to sever the terrorist organization's financial lifelines. Basbug also stressed that more should be done to disrupt PKK recruiting efforts and that existing laws should be used to further isolate the irreconcilables. He expressed hope that ongoing cooperation among Turkey, Iraq and the United States to counter the PKK will make further progress.

ANKARA 00000560 002 OF 002

#### MILITARY NOT AGAINST RELIGION

-----

15. (SBU) Riffing from President Obama's April 6 speech to parliament, Basbug declared that the military was not the enemy of religion. He said that the military respects the values of the people and that religion reflected part of the people's system of values. Quoting Ataturk, Basbug said "It is impossible for faithless nations to endure... but religion should be between God and his subject." Basbug made clear, however, that the military is against those who "use religion as a tool to advance their own interests."

16. (SBU) In a thinly-veiled reference to the Fetullah Gulen movement, Basbug sounded a warning about religious organizations making gains in "economic and socio-political" spheres, disguising themselves as democratic actors and engaging in a propaganda campaign to undercut the military, who they view as a key obstacle. Basbug said it is a mistake to think the military will stand idly by in the face of such attacks and that a response must be given within the boundaries of the law.

#### SECULARISM ESSENTIAL FOR DEMOCRACY

-----

17. (SBU) Basbug welcomed President Obama's April 6 speech in parliament and highlighted the President's praise for Ataturk and for Turkey as a "secular, democratic" nation. Basbug underscored the importance of secularism for democracy and for Turkey's unique and influential position in the region. He stressed that secularism is not in conflict with democracy, but rather, is necessary to protect the democratic principle of pluralism and is essential for Turkey. He defined secularism as not the absence of religion, but the maintenance of a separation between religion and the state in order to protect the rights of individuals to worship or not to worship.

CRITICS: REMARKS INDICATE TURKEY NOT YET MATURE DEMOCRACY

-----

18. (SBU) While welcoming Basbug's speech as a signal of change within the military and of the military's intention to

seek compromise and avoid tensions with the government, pro-AKP "Yeni Safak" columnist Ali Bayramoglu noted that in Western democracies, the speeches of military chiefs are never carried live nor would they receive such extensive media coverage. Bayramoglu also stressed that the statement of military chiefs would also have no impact on internal political dynamics in Western democracies, and concluded that "Turkey is still a republic in military colors."

COMMENT: THE SOLDIER-PHILOSOPHER

19. (C) Basbug was in turn academic and philosophical in his two-hour long address, drawing heavily on Samuel Huntington (particularly "The Soldier and the State") and Max Weber. He clearly paid attention to President Obama's visit to Turkey and tracked developments in the U.S. closely. With his speech, which focused almost exclusively on domestic political dynamics, Basbug struck a careful balance by cautioning ideological opponents of the military while rejecting the more extreme dogma of the secularists and nationalists who typically embrace the military as a bulwark against Islamists and Kurdish separatists. His conciliatory tone emphasizing the common values shared by all citizens of Turkey is helpful for Turkey's internal political discourse about its identity and future. All eyes will now be on his press conference next week, where he will likely be asked to clarify the views expressed in this speech.

Visit Ankara's Classified Web Site at  
<http://www.intelink.sgov.gov/wiki/Portal:Turkey>

Jeffrey